

# Donald Barthelme and the Adams Petroleum Center

By Stephen James

One of Houston's most important literary figures was the late writer and novelist Donald Barthelme (1931–1989). But for many years Barthelme labored in the shadow of his better-known father, Donald Barthelme, Sr. (1907–1996), a nationally prominent architect.<sup>1</sup> A native of Galveston, the senior Barthelme trained at the University of Pennsylvania and first gained attention in 1936 as the lead designer for the Hall of State, the principal building of the Texas Centennial Exposition in Dallas.<sup>2</sup> In 1948 he won an award from the American Institute of Architects for Houston's St. Rose of Lima Catholic Church, applauded for its simple Scandinavian modern forms.

Yet Barthelme made his reputation with the West Columbia Elementary School of 1951, which won many awards and was recognized internationally. Its innovative design departed from the traditional practice of placing classrooms along both sides of a long corridor. Instead, Barthelme arranged the building around two large courtyards; classrooms opened to the courts through floor-to-ceiling glass. This flooded the rooms with light while pro-



Donald Barthelme, 1954.

All photos courtesy of Donald Barthelme, Sr., Architectural Papers, University of Houston Libraries, Special Collections Department by permission of Estate of Donald Barthelme, Sr.

viding a sheltered environment for the students. At the main entrance a flamboyant scalloped canopy greeted visitors.<sup>3</sup>

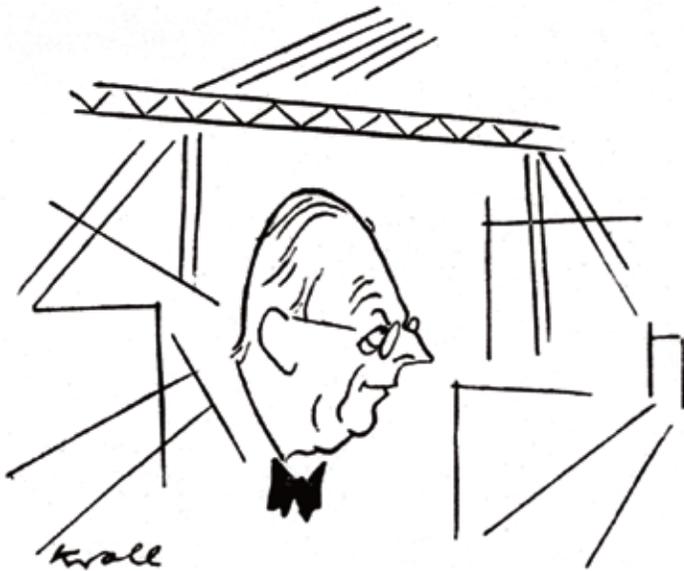
Barthelme's successful school buildings benefitted from a post-war faith that modern methods could improve the way students learned.<sup>4</sup> Educators promoted new curricula while architects offered their own solutions to perceived problems. An intellectual with an active mind, Barthelme parlayed his reputation as an expert on the design of school buildings into a new role as an educational reformer. In speeches and articles he argued for a more holistic learning environment in which students solved problems that combined multiple academic disciplines. As the father of five children, his interest in education was not surprising. In 1946 he joined the faculty of the University

of Houston's College of Architecture and in 1959 became head of Rice University's School of Architecture.

Barthelme's frequent appearances in newspapers and national magazines made him one of the best-known architects in Houston during the 1950s. He was a larger-than-life figure, a local celebrity who drove a sporty convertible

West Columbia Elementary School, West Columbia, Texas, 1951, north courtyard.





**DONALD BARTHELME, architect: "Everything good ever done was done by people who followed their own ideas. Walk alone, if necessary. Don't walk the beaten path."**

*Donald Barthelme was caricatured as part of a New Year's Day feature on the wisdom of local celebrities. Houston Post, January 1, 1956.*

Julius Kroll – *Houston Post*, 1956 © *Houston Chronicle*.  
Used by permission.

and charmed the newspaper columnists. He cultivated the image of a loner who went his own way rather than follow the crowd, a sentiment he shared when interviewed by the *Houston Post* in 1956.<sup>5</sup> In some ways his public persona seemed modeled on that of Howard Roark, the iconoclastic architect in Ayn Rand's novel, *The Fountainhead*.<sup>6</sup> Barthelme's sons later called him "the hero of his self-created myth."<sup>7</sup> Barthelme was a passionate amateur photographer, and he was one of his favorite subjects. The view seen at the beginning of the article is a self-portrait, carefully composed and orchestrated. It is Barthelme as he wanted the world to see him—thoughtful but direct and unflinching.

As Barthelme's reputation grew, Kenneth S. "Bud" Adams, Jr. (1923–2013), was making his own mark in the oil industry. His father was head of Phillips Petroleum Company in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. After the war, the younger Adams moved to Houston and founded the Ada Oil Company. By the mid-1950s, ready for larger offices, he purchased a thirteen-acre tract of land at the edge of the city, on Fannin Street at Brays Bayou. Across the street the Prudential Insurance Company had just erected its new regional headquarters building. They seemed to be the leading edge of a movement, with many businesses poised to abandon the downtown business district for suburban locations.



*Donald Barthelme, Adams Petroleum Center, aerial view looking southwest, 1956. APC tower is at right; Fannin crosses Brays Bayou at middle left.*



Hoping to capitalize on that trend, Adams decided to develop his large property as a mixed-use complex with office, retail, and residential components, to be known as the Adams Petroleum Center. To give credibility to such a speculative venture, Adams wanted a high-profile architect and chose Donald Barthelme to help him.

Barthelme welcomed the Adams commission. Because he insisted on working alone, he was limited to doing smaller projects that he could produce by himself, assisted by a few draftsmen.<sup>8</sup> What Adams was proposing would be the largest and most ambitious project of Barthelme's career.

Completing such a complex would take years, so Barthelme planned to build it in stages. Phase I, a low three-story building, would house the Ada Oil Company offices. When completed, this building would serve as the base structure for Phase II, a fourteen-story tower for outside tenants, to be erected above it. The brash and colorful Adams had big plans for the rest of the complex. Phases III and IV would include office buildings, parking garages, retail shops, and residential apartments. Adams envisioned the Adams Petroleum Center as a headquarters for the oil industry that would rival Houston's downtown business district. Therefore his development would offer "common facilities available to the oil, gas and chemical industries such as libraries, laboratories, showrooms and a meeting hall and exhibition space on a raised parking plaza forming the focal point of the group." A communications tower and a helipad rounded out the amenities. When complete, the multimillion-dollar project would be home to 5,000 people.<sup>9</sup>

Behind the scenes, Barthelme gave form to Adams's dreams. Between 1954 and 1957 the architect spent hundreds of hours studying different designs for the APC tower and preparing a dramatic aerial view of the complex. His working drawings for the initial building exceeded 300 sheets. It was an enormous effort for Barthelme's small office, also busy with several school projects. His family noticed: his sons wrote later that their father had "by then for the most part excused himself from the child-rearing business to spend his energies on buildings he was designing."<sup>10</sup>

The Ada Oil Company moved into its new building in early 1958, and Barthelme continued planning the tower that would follow. Adams hoped to lure the Humble Oil & Refining Company to the new office complex, reasoning that if one of the state's largest oil companies relocated to the Adams Petroleum Center, others would follow its lead. But by 1959 it was clear that other companies had little interest in moving to an office development named for a competitor. Adams abruptly abandoned the scheme and even declined to add the tower to his own modest building. By then he had turned his attention to another project. In August 1959, in the conference room Barthelme had designed for him, Adams and Dallas oil man Lamar Hunt announced the creation of the new American Football League. Adams would own the Houston franchise, Hunt the one in Dallas.<sup>11</sup> Adams now planned to use the undeveloped land for offices and practice fields for his football team, to be called the Houston Oilers.

Barthelme was no doubt disappointed by the project's failure, but he too had moved on. In mid-1959 he agreed to become head of the architecture school at Rice University.



*Donald Barthelme, Adams Petroleum Center, perspective view of APC Tower, 1956.*

He embraced the opportunity to implement the new reform curriculum he had developed. But it was a drastic change for the school, and Barthelme—never known for his affability—failed to win the hearts and minds of his colleagues. After two stormy years the faculty revolted and succeeded in having him fired.

For Barthelme, the failures of the Adams and Rice ventures took a toll, aggravated by years of contentious relations with the building contractors who failed to meet his high standards. In 1963, at the peak of his career, he closed the doors to his office and retired from architectural practice. Barthelme was clearly discouraged, but he was only fifty-six, and his passion for education offered a new challenge. He returned to the University of Houston where he devoted himself to shaping the next generation of architects. He retired from teaching in 1974 and died in 1996.

In 2001 the University of Houston Libraries acquired Barthelme's papers and drawings from his estate. They are available to researchers at the library's Special Collections department, where they sit near the Donald Barthelme Literary Papers, a collection of materials produced by Barthelme's son. Recently, the UH Digital Library added a number of items from the Donald Barthelme, Sr., Architectural Papers. The Digital Library makes accessible online important holdings of the UH libraries and archives. These items illustrate Barthelme's designs through pencil sketches, photographs, and the detailed working drawings used to construct his buildings. His work was published widely during his career, but because the Adams Petroleum Center was never built in the form Barthelme intended, his sketches for the project have rarely been seen. Significantly, the online collection includes a few of the dozens of studies that the architect made for the Adams project.

**Stephen James** is Curator, Architecture & Planning Collections, University of Houston Libraries, Special Collections Department. He holds a Ph.D. in Architectural History from the University of Virginia.